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RHMFISS/HQ USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 000158

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MOPS, IZ, LE, SY
SUBJECT: WHEN CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST: SYRIA'S PROXY
WAR IN IRAQ AT HEART OF 2008-09 SEIDNAYA PRISON RIOTS

REF: A. 08 DAMASCUS 00482
[1](#)B. 08 DAMASCUS 00517
[1](#)C. 08 DAMASCUS 00814
[1](#)D. 08 DAMASCUS 00885
[1](#)E. 09 DAMASCUS 00006

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: Lawyer and Syrian Human Rights Organization-SWASIAH activist Catherine al-Tali (strictly protect) updated us on SWASIAH's ongoing investigation into what happened during the Seidnaya prison riots in July and December 2008, and January 2009 (refs A, B, D and E). SWASIAH's investigation, al-Tali confided at a February 11 meeting, had culminated in a series of taped interviews on the riots with three military personnel, one Seidnaya prison guard, and one former Seidnaya inmate. According to these sources, the Islamists in Seidnaya responsible for the riots were part of a cadre of inmates sent to Iraq sometime after 2003 to fight with the insurgency. Upon their return to Syria, they were re-arrested and returned to Seidnaya prison. Feeling that their service warranted better treatment from the SARG, the prisoners staged two riots that led to the death of many military personnel, nearly 100 prisoners, and untold injuries. End Summary.

From Prisoner to Foreign Fighter

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Lawyer and Syrian Human Rights Organization-SWASIAH activist Catherine al-Tali told us that over the last four months she had taped interviews with three military personnel, one prison guard, and one former Seidnaya inmate, all of whom reportedly had first-hand knowledge of the Seidnaya prison riots. Tali said she was in the process of compiling a written report that she would pass to us. When asked for copies of the taped interviews, Tali hesitated and said she would try.

[1](#)3. (S/NF) According to Tali's contacts, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the SARG offered Seidnaya inmates the opportunity to receive military training in Syria and then

travel to Iraq and fight coalition forces, a claim we had heard in early January 2009 from imprisoned SWASIAH leader Muhanad al-Hasani (ref E). Tali had no additional information on how many inmates joined or at what times they were sent to Iraq. She did report, however, that of those who returned from Iraq to Syria, some remained at large (but in contact with the regime), others were sent to Lebanon, and a third group were re-arrested and remanded to Seidnaya prison. The group in Seidnaya were, Tali claimed, "Islamists." (Comment: Tali was unable to identify the specific government/security entity responsible for routing prisoners in and out of the country; nor did she know how many of those former inmates still at large or presently in Lebanon were also Islamists. End Comment.)

Planned Riots

¶4. (S/NF) The group of returned foreign fighters in Seidnaya felt the SARG, by sending them back to prison, had cheated them, Tali explained. The inmates had expected better treatment, perhaps even freedom, and were upset over prison conditions. These factors led to the planning of the July 5, 2008 riot (refs A & B), she said. Her sources claimed the inmates fashioned swords from iron bed supports. Once they had accumulated a sufficient supply of arms, they staged a riotous protest over prison conditions.

¶5. (S/NF) The SARG reportedly responded by surrounding the prison with elements of the Fourth Armored Brigade and sending a group of military cadets, armed only with batons,

to quell the uprising. According to Tali's sources, the armed inmates quickly captured the cadets, stripped them of their uniforms, forced them to don prison garb, and then marched them at sword-point onto the roof of the prison. When the cadets emerged onto the roof, the military (assuming them to be prisoners) opened fire, killing an unknown number before realizing their error. Once it became clear what had happened, Tali said, the Fourth Armored Brigade entered the prison, killing between 50-60 inmates.

¶6. (S/NF) Tali's sources claimed the SARG military were only partially successful in quelling the riot. The Islamist faction reportedly maintained control over part of the prison and held a large enough number of hostages that from July through October they were able to trade hostages for food. During that time, Tali contended, the prisoners regrouped and planned the riots that took place in December 2008 (ref D & E), which resulted in an additional 35-50 inmate deaths. Tali's sources believed that the prisoners' organized violence and ability to hold on for as long as they did was largely due to the military training they had received prior to being sent to Iraq.

¶7. (S/NF) Comment: Still a sensitive subject and a black mark for military and security services who for months failed to subdue the riots, the Seidnaya troubles seem to have subsided and the SARG has begun to allow families limited access to imprisoned relatives, though we have heard there are still prisoners whom nobody has been able to visit since the riots began. Tali's reporting adds to the mounting evidence that the SARG allowed Seidnaya prisoners to train in Syria for combat operations in Iraq. According to Hasani and other diplomatic contacts, the SARG coordinated with Damascus-based Fatah al-Islam elements (ref C & E) to train the prisoners and transport them across the Iraqi-Syrian border. The SARG's roundup and return to Seidnaya of prisoner-combatants might have provided a revenge motive, as diplomatic sources suspected, for Fatah al-Islam's alleged bombing of a Syrian Military Intelligence site on September 27, 2008 (ref C). End Comment.

HUNTER